

Arab Socialism

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From the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War, socialism in the Arab world emerged as a political and economic aspiration espoused by sectors of the intelligentsia and fought for by radical movements, political parties, trade union formations, and student societies. By the mid-1960s, socialism assumed an almost hegemonic influence. Ideologically, it was adopted by Nasserism, the dominant Arab political current of the era; the two largest Arab nationalist political formations: the Ba'ath and the Movement of Arab Nationalists; and, of course, by a range of communist and socialist parties. Economically, socialism was proclaimed as the official system of the five most populous Arab countries: Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Sudan, and Syria, in addition to Libya and South Yemen.¹ It was further embraced by liberation movements extending from the Omani province of Dhufar on the shores of the Indian Ocean, through Palestine along the Mediterranean, and all the way to the Western Sahara at the edge of the Atlantic.

Deeply influential as it was, Arab socialism is regularly approached from a point of dismissal or discontent. Western governments and their conservative regional allies, along with capitalist ideologues and neoliberal technocrats, have long characterized it as a shackling ideology that ushered in several lost decades of arrested development. Popular religious movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, portray it as having reincarnated pre-Islamic *Jahiliya*, an age of ignorance and immorality. European and Arab liberals associate it with past and present governments that undermined freedoms, suppressed representative democracy, and elevated the security state.² In their analysis, the ills of the political order are detached from

1 Due to the vastness of this topic, analytical cohesion, and word count limitations, we focus on Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria.

2 Similar tendencies are also commonly found amongst the ranks of contemporary Arab democratic left currents. A voluminous recent example is Sh. Younis, *Nida'a al-Sha'ab: Tarikh Naqdi li al-Ideologia al-Nasseriya* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2012).

colonial and class contexts.³ As for orthodox Marxists, most view it as a form of economic reformism or state capitalism, seeking to limit rather than to abolish private property, and the more Eurocentric amongst them present it as an underdeveloped phenomenon falling short of European expectations.⁴ Even in the realm of iconography, Arab socialism is bypassed. A Nasser or a Ben Bella is far less likely to feature in the Western radical imagination than a Mao, a Ho Chi Minh, or a Castro.⁵ As for the old ideological proponents of Arab socialism, they have long retreated into 'left-wing melancholia', while the few governments that still carry its banner are socialist in name only.⁶

Too radical for some, too reformist for others, Arab socialism has few champions today. Yet it still has an enduring presence in contemporary affairs, if only in terms of its felt absence. Amongst new oppositional currents to capitalist globalization, particularly in previously socialist Arab countries whose governments embraced neoliberal paradigms, there is a revived interest in understanding what Arab socialism was, and how alternatives to the orders that have replaced it could be envisioned. Such an understanding, we insist, could be arrived at only through engaging with Arab socialism on its own terms, appreciating the specific histories that influenced its trajectory.

Coloniality and Nineteenth-Century Socialist Encounters

Let us start by positing a distinction between 'Arab socialism', which emerged in the 1940s in conjunction with the rise of pan-Arab nationalism and achieved state power, and 'socialism in the Arab lands' dating back to the nineteenth century. Both were profoundly informed by the colonial condition, but they responded to it in substantially different ways.

Initially, socialism arrived on the heels of colonialism. That was the socialism of European imperial adventurers and administrators rather than

3 For a further discussion of the colonial abuse of democratic space, see S. Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 107.

4 Such critiques were especially common in the 1960s and 1970s. They not only took issue with economic policy, but also with its philosophical foundations. See for instance S. Akhavi, 'Egypt's socialism and Marxist thought: some preliminary observations on social theory and metaphysics', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, 2 (1975), pp. 190–211.

5 For example, not a single Arab figure appears to date in the Verso book series 'Revolutions'.

6 For the notion of left-wing melancholia, see E. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

radical Arabs. Perhaps the first socialists to set foot in the Arab region were the utopian Saint-Simonians. Led by Prosper Enfantin, a score of them worked for a decade in Egypt between 1827 and 1837, and many more ended up in Algeria. Universalists in theory, they claimed that they had no interest 'in chaining the Orient to the chariot of the Occident' but were rather inviting it 'to share the throne of the world'.⁷ In practice, however, they energetically contributed to fettering Arab societies with the chains of colonial rule, ultimately serving the cause of European capitalist expansion.⁸ Their presence reflected the advance of European military and economic colonization as well as serious early nineteenth-century local attempts, like that of Egypt's Muhammad Ali Pasha, to catch up with European industrialization. These attempts had a limited proletarianizing impact due to their short life-span.⁹

Collective workers' struggles did take place. The 1827 Qala'a factory strike and the 1836 iron workers strike were early examples.¹⁰ This resistance did not end with the retreat of state-led industrialization. The demands of the 1882 Suez coal-heavers strike were endorsed by Urabi's revolutionary government but reversed after the British occupation.¹¹ Nevertheless, persistent *acts of resistance* did not lead to the rise of a new textually and institutionally codified *ideology of comprehensive radical change*. Local artisanal structures,

7 M. Chevalier, *Religion Saint-Simonienne. Politique industrielle et système de la Méditerranée* (Paris: Globe, 1832), p. 18.

8 Inspired by Muhammad Ali Pasha (to whom they referred as *Le Pacha Industriel*) and his enlargement of state intervention in the economy, Prosper Enfantin led the group that lived in Egypt, but their greatest influence was exerted subsequently in Algeria. Their campaigns ranged from advocacy, through the Société d'Etudes du Canal de Suez, for the construction of a waterway that was to become a major site of colonial competition and an artery of capitalist trade, to playing an active role in the French *mission civilisatrice*. Their socialism had little to do with Arabs (and the Amazigh in the case of Algeria), except as objects of development and governance. For a detailed examination of their enmeshment in the French colonial project, see O. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

9 For instance, the Alexandria naval arsenal (est. 1829), had, at the peak of its production, a workforce of 9,000 people and the cannon factory (est. 1820) at the al-Qala'a arsenal in Cairo had 1,500 workers. This is not to mention a host of other military production lines, more than thirty textile factories established by the end of the 1830s, three major sugar mills and refineries, two glass factories, a dairy products factory, steel and iron factories, a large fez production plant, a paper mill, a press, and many other institutions utilizing modern machinery operated by a labour force engaged in processing, manufacturing, and war industries. See A. Al-Jirtli, *Tarikh al-Sina'a fi Misr fi al-Nisf al-Awal min al-Qarn al-Tasi* 'Ashar (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif fi Misr, 1952), pp. 52–65, 117.

10 Ibid., pp. 112–13, 138.

11 Z. Lockman, "'Worker' and 'Working Class' in Pre-1914 Egypt: A Rereading", in Z. Lockman (ed.), *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 71–110 at p. 84.

belonging to a vibrant ancient guild tradition, represented the interests of craftsmen in each sector. These guilds played an important social and political role until their gradual demise in the early twentieth century, but they never advocated seizure of the means of production or a radical overhaul of society.¹²

At any rate, guilds did not represent the majority of the population, which was still tied to the land, having yet to experience the alienation of labour on the scale seen elsewhere. While feudalism had long been on the retreat in Europe, land concentration and absentee landlordism were expanding across the Arab region, encouraged by 'reforms' such as those introduced in the Ottoman Land Code of 1858. Given the fact that the majority of people tilled the soil, the foremost social challenge was the peasant rather than the proletarian question.

In the light of these structural realities, socialism was initially encountered via a textual, rather than a social movement, route. Socialist vocabulary entered the Arabic lexicon in the last third of the nineteenth century, at least three decades before socialist movements were led by Arabs. In 1878, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, a non-socialist, coined the current standard word for socialism, *al-ishtirakiyya*, whose linguistic root connotes sharing, participation, and partnership.¹³ Other thinkers of his age used the word *al-ijtima'iyya*, engaging in a more literal translation of the French term *socialisme*, and reserving the term *ishtirakiyya* to refer to communism.¹⁴

Already in the 1870s, some distinctions were made between revolutionary and reformist socialist currents, informed by contemporary events. The radical demands of the 1871 Paris Commune, whose events left an indelible mark on a range of *Nahda* (Arab renaissance) authors proficient in French, were particularly influential in this regard. A prominent journalist, for instance, referred to the communards as *al-Ijtimay'oun al-Ibah'iyoun* (the permissive socialists) and *ghulat al-Hurriya* (the zealots of liberty or liberal zealots).¹⁵ As for the actual content of socialism, it was understood *inter alia*,

12 For an elaborate discussion of these guilds and their relationship to new forms of organizing, see J. Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

13 He did so while covering Russian radical movements in his Istanbul-based newspaper, *al-Jawa'ib*. See F. Traboulsi, 'Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1804–87): The Quest for Another Modernity', in M. Weiss and J. Hanssen (eds.), *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 175–86 at p. 179.

14 See, for instance, 'Ayuhah Ghani Tah'athar', *al-Muqtataf*, 1 November 1888, pp. 78–83.

15 These terms were used, for example, by Adib Ishaq in his 20 January 1881 eulogy of Louis Blanqui. In Ishaq's usage, *ghulat al-hurriya* were distinguished from *ahl al-hurriya*

depending on context and author, as social reform (ranging from welfare provision to class levelling), an emphasis on collectivity as opposed to individuality, liberality in moral affairs and sharing in economic ones, co-operation and mutuality, as well as government regulation and redistribution of production, wealth, and resources.

Even in this textual realm, socialism was met with resistance from three main quarters. Liberal republicans like Adib Ishaq promoted the revolutionary principle of 'equality' but rejected its association with class struggle.¹⁶ Proponents of *laissez faire*, such as the editors of *al-Muqtataf*, initially rejected socialism on economic grounds as well as on the basis of a defence of property rights.¹⁷ As for champions of Islamic reform, like al-Afghani, they put forth a fundamental spiritual and moral argument against socialism while recasting it in a religious light.¹⁸ Al-Afghani, for instance, innovated the pre-emption of socialist influence by reportedly asserting that socialism was a Muslim principle that was practised in the era of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹

More sympathetic treatments, like that of al-Kawakibi, the renowned Aleppan philosopher and agitator, continued to exemplify engagement on the part of public intellectuals rather than movement praxis.²⁰ A more secularly framed engagement was taking place in other *Nahda* circles, particularly amongst thinkers who hailed from Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria). In

(the people of liberty, or the liberals). See N. Alloush (ed.), *Adib Ishaq. Al-Kitabat al-Siyassiya wa al-Ijtima'iya* (Beirut: Dar al-Talia'a, 1978), pp. 295–6.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁷ Publications like *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal* took that line for much of the *fin-de-siècle*, eventually changing their position and adopting a more sympathetic tone in the early twentieth century. See I. Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 37–43.

¹⁸ This small tract – occasioned in part by the controversies arising out of Darwin's evolutionary biology – was written in Farsi and translated into Arabic by Muhammad Abduh, the renowned modernizing Egyptian sheikh of al-Azhar. See J. al-Din al-Afghani, *al-Rad 'ala al-Dahriyyen*, trans. M. Abduh (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Mahmoudiya, 1935) (original Persian published in 1879), pp. 56–8. For further context, see M. Kohn, 'Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilisation', *Political Theory* 37, 3 (2009), pp. 398–422.

¹⁹ See J. al-Din al-Afghani, *Khatirat Jamal al-Din al-Hussaini al-Afghani: Ara'a wa Aqwal*, ed. al-Makhzumi and M. Pasha (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shurouq al-Duwalliya, 2002 [1933]), pp. 159–70. For a different assessment of al-Afghani's approach, see S. A. Hanna, 'Al-Afghani: A Pioneer of Islamic Socialism', *Muslim World* 57, 1 (1967), pp. 24–32 at p. 25. We obviously disagree with Hanna's claim that al-Afghani was a socialist pioneer. For the anti-communist dimension in al-Sibai's Islamic socialism, see the concluding paragraphs of his book on the subject, essentially comparing the greatness that Islam brought with the degradation that communism seeks to bring. See M. al-Siba'i, *Ishtirakiyat al-Islam*, 2nd edn (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qawmiya, 1960), pp. 231–3.

²⁰ Al-Sayid al-Furati [Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi], *Umm al-Qurra* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Misriya bi al-Azhar, 1931 [1898]), p. 53. For a discussion of Kawakibi and socialism, see K. S. al-Husari, *Three Reformers: A Study in Modern Arab Political Thought* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966), pp. 73–8.

some quarters, there was a fascination with socialism as an avenue of scientific intervention into the realm of human organization.²¹ In others, there was an interest in socialism as a vehicle for building a just society. Farah Antoun's 1903 *Religion, Science, and Money*, for instance, offered a fictional account whereby the workers, the capitalists, the intellectuals, and the clergy present their positions on the social question. In this narrative, the representative of the workers explicitly endorses Karl Marx's ideas.²²

Antoun's reference to Marx was one of the earliest in Arabic that associated socialism with his philosophy. That was not coincidental given the growth of the Second International at the *fin de siècle*. Yet there was no organized Arab representation at the International, and the modest contact between its parties and the Arab lands was limited to members of a European diaspora that had arrived on the heels of British and French imperialism.²³ As much as it had to do with the relatively small size of the industrial proletariat, this Arab, and indeed general Afro-Asian, absence on the Second Internationalist stage also had to do with the weakness of pull factors.

The Second International was, in its organizational composition at least, a European phenomenon and its constituent parties and movements did not invest heavily in the idea of spreading socialist organizing in Afro-Asian lands. The likes of Rosa Luxemburg displayed an immense awareness of Eurocentric othering and its actual concrete colonial function.²⁴ But such awareness had to contend with a powerful current that had advocated socialist varieties of colonialism, and in some cases, Zionist settler-colonization. Emptied of moral critique in the name of anti-utopianism and opposing idealist deviation, socialist colonial discourse – as was abundantly clear in the debates of the 7th Congress in Stuttgart and elsewhere – endorsed colonialism as a progressive civilizational force. In this atmosphere, there were no Arab socialist parties during the era of the Second International, unless one counts Muhammad Jamal al-Din's Blessed Socialist Party (est. 1908), perhaps the earliest Arab organization to have socialism in its

21 This was exemplified by Sh. Shumayyil. For his socialism, see Khuri-Makdisi, *Eastern Mediterranean*, pp. 42–3; A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 [1962]), pp. 248–53.

22 F. Antoun, *al-Din wa al-Ilm wa al-Mal* (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2012 [1903]), pp. 32–3.

23 A similar pattern could be detected with relation to anarcho-sindicalist networks, which had achieved serious grounding amongst Italian and Greek communities in Cairo, Alexandria, and elsewhere, but had a tiny Arab presence. For anarchist networks, consult Khuri-Makdisi, *Eastern Mediterranean*, pp. 94–135.

24 R. Luxemburg, 'Peace Utopias' (1911), in R. B. Day and D. Gaido (eds.), *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 456.

name.²⁵ All indications suggest that this was a fleeting political formation with no lasting consequence.

The Birth of Socialist Movements, Trade Unions, and Parties: 1908–1948

The twentieth century quickly ushered in new economic and political transformations, resulting in a substantial expansion of the working class, the growth of an associational life connected to it, and the concurrent development of its consciousness in various Arab countries. It was not until the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution of 1908 that unions were able to properly form and operate in the Ottoman areas outside Egypt. In that year, 104 strikes were recorded across the empire, some of them witnessing creative acts such as the disruption of trains near Aleppo.²⁶

There is little evidence, however, of socialism establishing deep roots within Arab labour movements at this early stage of their history.²⁷ When the Egyptian author Salama Mousa authored his pamphlet *al-Ishtirakiyya* in 1913, he still felt that the structural conditions for the rise of socialist movements were not yet ripe, restricting himself to enlightening ‘public opinion about socialism’s nature’.²⁸ The earliest unions that represented local workers often emerged out of anti-colonial rather than socialist aspirations. These included the Manual Trades Workers Union, *Niqabat ‘Ummal al-Sana’i’ al-Yadawiyya*, founded in 1909 by the Egyptian Watani (patriotic) Party. As far as we know, this was the first modern labour body to use *Naqaba* in its title. Currently well established as the standard Arabic term for ‘union’, this word borrowed from the older guild tradition, effectively legitimating modern labour organizing with reference to an ancient institution known across the Islamicate.²⁹

25 K. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Ba’th Socialist Party: History, Ideology, and Organization* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), p. 5.

26 D. Quataert, ‘Ottoman Workers and the State, 1826–1914’, in Lockman (ed.), *Workers and Working Classes*, pp. 21–40 at p. 31.

27 To be sure, foreign socialist and anarchist organizers, particularly Greeks and Italians, played a major role in the creation of such bodies as the short-lived Cairo-based Tobacco Rollers Association (1899) and subsequent associations established to represent tailors, law clerks, and other workers. Although becoming more visible, such organizations were predominantly, although not exclusively, representative of migrant European labourers. R. Abbas, *al-Haraka al-Umaliyya fi Misr, 1899–1952* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-‘Ala li al-Thaqafa, 2016), p. 60.

28 S. Mousa, *al-Ishtirakiyya* (Cairo: Hindawi, 2012 [1913]), p. 7.

29 Lockman, “‘Worker’ and ‘Working Class’”, p. 90.

Attempts at endowing the Arab trade union movement with a more socialist orientation, and at establishing socialist parties, gained immensely from the victory of the 1917 October Revolution. The Second International's schizophrenic outlook on colonialism and imperialism was replaced by a more consistent condemnation of both phenomena. More importantly, a concerted effort was launched to create communist parties in Africa and Asia. But promising calls, like Sultan Galiev's, to create a 'colonial international' went unheeded. At the 1920 Baku Eastern Congress, organized by the newly founded Third International (Comintern), only 3 Arabs were present out of nearly 1,900 participants.³⁰

Nevertheless, the Comintern's foundation was a turning point in Arab socialist history with concrete results. This was reflected in the establishment of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in 1921 by Marxist figures seeking approval from the Comintern. Out of this experience there emanated the first major socialist party in the region: the Egyptian Socialist Party. The discourse of the party was markedly reformist in its origins and had Fabian as much as Bolshevik influences. For instance, one of its theoreticians, the aforementioned Salama Musa, was committed to a peaceful transition to socialism. He announced that his party 'wished success for the Bolsheviks in their great experiment', but that it was committed to 'gradualism' as opposed to revolution. Musa went as far as saying that 'I believe it is possible for us to convince a large number of well-intentioned wealthy people of the supremacy of socialism over capitalism.' The renowned author May Ziadeh responded to him in her characteristically probing prose: 'One wonders: what will happen if that large class of wealthy people were left unconvinced?'³¹

This debate over peaceful and revolutionary socialism led to the expulsion of Fabian socialists from the Egyptian Socialist Party. The entirety of the Arab world, save for the Saudi state and the Yemeni imamate, had become formally or informally colonized following Ottoman defeat in the First World War. Now that one of the world's great powers had declared itself a union of socialist republics, had further announced its opposition to colonialism, and was seeking to expand the socialist international well beyond Europe, it induced a gravitational pull to socialism within colonized areas like the Arab region. Despite this allure, early local sections of the Third International did not gain paramouncy within the Arab liberation

30 J. Pennar, 'The Arabs, Marxism, and Moscow: a historical survey', *Middle East Journal* 22, 4 (1968), pp. 433–47 at p. 434.

31 M. Ziadeh, 'Al-Musawa', 5: al-Ishriakiya al-Silmiyya', *al-Muqtataf* 59, 6, 1 December 1921, p. 566.

movement. Several causal factors have been historically highlighted. One is the hostility of the religious establishment, which had launched, especially after the 1917 October Revolution, major attacks against 'Bolshevism'. These included the official fatwa of 2 July 1919 issued by the Mufti of Egypt denouncing Bolshevism as a 'modern cult' whose roots date back to Mazdakism.³² At the time, it was widely suspected that this fatwa was issued with British nudging, publicized as it was not only in Egypt, but also in India. The fatwa was certainly in tune with official colonial policy, which encouraged, over the following decades, the introduction of a broad range of anti-communist laws across the Arab region. Governments under the colonial thumb passed legislation such as the 1925 laws in Egypt banning socialist publications and the 1948 Law No. 17 in Jordan, which was concerned with 'resisting communism' even before a communist party was established in that country.³³

Socialist currents faced another serious difficulty, namely, the dominance of liberalism in the 1920s. Throughout the interwar period, independence movements were infused with liberal economic and social ideas. Their leaderships – largely descending from the urban landed elite or rural notability – were focused on the expulsion of colonial forces rather than the complete overthrow of existing socio-economic structures and relations. The quest for independence endowed them with a great deal of legitimacy as well as mobilizational vitality. This was certainly the case for the leadership of the revolutions and revolts in Egypt (1919), Iraq (1920), Morocco (1921), Syria (1925), and Palestine (1936). Beyond launching repressive anti-socialist campaigns – such as the Egyptian Wafd's 1924 dissolution of the communist party and the arrest of its central committee members – several of the interwar nationalist leaderships used their greater resources and established legitimacy to achieve hegemony over working-class structures, severely limiting socialists from accessing their natural reservoir of cadres.³⁴

In the context of twentieth-century colonialism, any pursuit of socialism that was not grounded in anti-colonial politics was courting failure. The social question was intensely connected to the nature of the state. In the

32 See www.dar-alifta.org/AR/ViewFatwa.aspx?sec=fatwa&LangID=1&ID=15685&إسماعيل شرفي, last accessed 20 February 2021. On Mazdakism, see Touraj Daryaee, Chapter 1, in Volume I.

33 A. Q. Yassin, *al-'Haraka al-Shuyu'iyya al-Misriyya: al-Juthour, al-Qismat, al-Maal, 1921–1965* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya li al-Kitab, 2011), p. 17.

34 This took place in Palestine as well as in Egypt and elsewhere. See M. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010 [1979]), pp. 116–29.

imperialist metropolises, substantive change was envisioned as requiring – depending on the brand of socialism – the abolition, acquisition, or sharing of the state. The situation was different in the colonies: ultimate political authority did not reside in the local state, resting instead with the metropolitan centre that had formally or informally governed it. Contesting the colonial state was a vision that came to be embraced not just by a large mass of the peasant majority and growing urban proletarian minority, but also by a considerable section of the large land-owning class and the petit bourgeoisie. In other words, it had achieved a degree of national paramountcy in multiple locales.

Several Arab socialist currents emerged out of the communists' indecisiveness in engaging with these realities. The latter's limitations derived from their internal composition as well as their relationship to Moscow, which prevented them from adequately centring the colonial question. In Egypt, and more so in Palestine, communism was disproportionately spearheaded by European Jewish cadres. While communism in Syria/Lebanon and Iraq had Arab roots, its mode of operation was decisively shaped by the Comintern. This produced some major ironies. As Yassin al-Hafez once noted, the territories of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine had a great deal of ethnic and linguistic cohesion, and had, until 1917, been governed for centuries by a single Ottoman imperial state. Yet the Comintern did not push for the establishment of a single communist party to represent them. Instead, it facilitated or allowed the emergence of separate formations corresponding to popularly despised geographical divisions imposed by Britain and France. By contrast, the Comintern pushed for the creation of one party for Indochina, despite the historic national, ethnic, and linguistic demarcations separating Vietnam from Cambodia and Laos.³⁵ Thus, divergences eventually emerged among socialist currents that prioritized the project of Arab unification, currents that advocated shifting single-state national movements in a socialist direction, and communist parties that promoted local class struggle as well as anti-imperialist policies guided by the USSR.

35 The early Soviet disinclination to support Arab unification projects was not always shared by communists on the ground. In 1931, the communists of Palestine and Syria passed a resolution emphasizing that 'The Communists are duty bound to wage a struggle for national independence and national unity, not only within the narrow and artificial boundaries created by imperialism and the dynastic interests of certain Arab countries, but on an all-Arab scale, for the national unification of the entire East.' See 'The Tasks of the Communists in the All-Arab National Movement', in T. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 140.

By the 1940s, all of these currents had advanced. This was especially seen in Iraq after the British crackdown on Arab nationalists following Britain's invasion of Iraq in 1941, leaving a political vacuum that was quickly filled by the Communist Party. But it was also seen in Egypt. The Wafd's singular focus on the national question and failure to carry out serious agricultural or labour reform encouraged the development of more radical currents. Within the party, there emerged 'the Wafdist vanguard', some of its leaders calling explicitly in 1947 for 'state socialism', in accordance with which 'the state must now begin to seize the monopolies and the public facilities companies'.³⁶ Within the international socialist arena, members of such currents also played an important role in promoting anti-colonial struggles, such as the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925 and the Palestinian cause. This was not an easy task. Within the Comintern, and within such formations as the League Against Imperialism, Arab figures faced a formidable conscious or subconscious Zionist presence, consolidated by persistent Orientalist attitudes.³⁷

Ultimately, the Soviet Union played a significant role in the legitimisation and arming of a settler-colonial state in Palestine. Not only did it marshal its diplomatic resources in support of the UN Partition Plan of 1947, but it also provided, through the Czechoslovakian arms deal of 1948, settler-colonist militias with the armaments they used to establish their sovereignty over the territory and to expel much of the Palestinian indigenous population. This caused a great deal of damage to communist prospects across the region. Needless to say, the majority of Arab communists, including the committed Iraqi Jewish cadres active in the League for Combating Zionism, opposed this policy, but were then forced to submit to Moscow's line.³⁸

Arab Socialism in the Anti-Colonial Age: 1943–1970

This tension between Moscow and local communist parties played a substantial role in the emergence of an Arab nationalist variety of socialism, as can be especially seen in the case of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. This was the first party operating on a pan-Arab scale to combine socialism with

36 Quoted in T. al-Bishri, *al-'Haraka al-Siyasiyya fi Misr, 1945–1953*, 2nd edn (Cairo: Dar al-Shurouq, 2002), p. 300.

37 S. Tannoury-Karam, 'Long Live the Revolutionary Alliance Against Imperialism: Interwar Anti-Imperialism and the Arab Levant', in M. Louro et al. (eds.), *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020), pp. 107–34.

38 For a detailed examination of the role of Soviet dominance in weakening Arab communist parties, see Ismael, *Communist Movement in the Arab World*, pp. 17–41.

Arab nationalism, eventually instituting several socialist policies in Syria and Iraq. The two leading founders of the party, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, had encountered socialist movements during their studies at the Sorbonne and became fellow travellers of the Syrian–Lebanese Communist Party upon their return to Syria in 1933. But they became disillusioned with the Communist Party after the shift in its policy at the Seventh Comintern Conference and the establishment of the Popular Front government in France in 1936. Emerging from the underground, the Syrian–Lebanese Communist Party had become, as far as Aflaq and Bitar were concerned, more active in combating fascism in Europe than in fully confronting the colonialist agendas.

This encouraged Aflaq and Bitar to articulate an Arab nationalist theoretical framework that diverged from Marxism, all the while retaining socialist commitments. In 1944, Aflaq articulated the grounds on which he opposed Marxist communism, counterpoising it to socialism. In his view, communism was a byproduct of European as opposed to Arab realities, born out of the West's 'conflicting fanatic nationalisms, and its inflated industries'. In an Arab context, it was 'fighting non-existent illnesses' that distracted Arabs from their real problems: 'Communism wants to destroy nationalist fanaticism in a nation whose nationalism has not yet formed, fearing for other nations and global peace [from Arab nationalism] at a time when the Arabs are ruled by others.'³⁹

For Aflaq and his Ba'athist comrades, socialism afforded more favourable possibilities, as long as it assumed a particular Arab character. On this basis, the Ba'ath's first conference (1947) adopted socialism. The party's constitution stipulated that 'The Arab Ba'ath Party is a socialist party. It believes that socialism is a necessity emanating out of the core of Arab nationalism. It is the ideal system that allows the Arab people to achieve its potential and enables the full blossoming of that people's genius, guaranteeing rapid growth in the nation's moral and material production as well as close fraternity among its individuals.'⁴⁰

That formulation clearly subordinated socialism to the process of national formation, the former serving the latter. It was supplemented with the Ba'ath's commitment to tackling the social question in a manner that avoided alignment in the newly emerging Cold War, although the party took a decidedly more uncompromising stance in relation to the old colonial

39 M. Aflaq, 'Mawqifuna min al-Nathariya al-Shi'u'iya' (1944), in M. Aflaq, *Fi Sabeel al-Ba'ath*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1959), p. 279.

40 Constitution of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party (1947), Fourth Article.

powers Britain and France and their larger global ally the United States.⁴¹ A few months after the first Ba'ath conference, the Great Powers partitioned Palestine through the United Nations, and the settler-colonist militias of the Zionist movement began a sustained ethnic cleansing campaign. In response, the party advocated full Arab mobilization in support of the Palestinian Arabs and sent a volunteer unit led by Aflaq and Bitar. After the defeat, the party expanded substantially in an atmosphere that was described by Aflaq in the following terms:

The Israeli threat enhanced the spirit of liberationist and social revolution in general, as well as the spontaneous feeling of the people and its natural need for national unification in particular. In contrast, it pushed the ruling class (which is inherently separatist by virtue of its very presence and interests) towards greater submission to Western colonialism.⁴²

In this post-*Nakba* (post-Catastrophe) atmosphere, the Ba'ath's characterization of national liberation, Arab unity, and social revolution as being co-dependent was gaining broad currency.

This was an assessment shared by Akram Hourani, an MP from Hama who later merged with the Ba'ath, and who also spent time in Palestine as part of another Syrian volunteer force. In 1950, two years after his return from Palestine, Hourani founded the Arab Socialist Party. By then the ruling elite's suppression of the social struggle in the name of national struggle was becoming unsustainable. Despite growing urbanization, the majority of the Arab region's population belonged to the peasantry. Accordingly, the land question – emanating out of the severe concentration of ownership and the existence of oppressive landlordism in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – was felt with increasing urgency.⁴³ In 1943, Hourani was elected to the Syrian parliament on the platform of opposing the landlords and initiating land reform. Over the years, his agenda expanded to include the nationalization of monopolies, the provision of public goods, and the establishment of the welfare state, policies that were more effectively pursued after his merger with the Ba'ath Party in 1952.

In that fateful year, new developments were taking place in the Egyptian arena. The Free Officers, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and other army figures

41 Abu Jaber, *Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party*, p. 27.

42 M. Aflaq, 'Mawqifuna al-Siyasi min al-Shiyu'iya' (1956), in M. Aflaq, *Fi Sabeel al-Ba'ath*, vol. IV, ch. 79, see <http://albaath.online.fr/Volume%20IV-Chapters/index-Volume%20IV.htm>, last accessed 1 February 2021.

43 A. al-Hourani, *Muthakirat Akram al-Hourani*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 2000), p. 26.

who had fought in Palestine, launched a *coup d'état* on 23 July that was to change the course of modern Arab history in general, and Arab socialism in particular. That coup – initially referred to as the blessed movement and then as the July Revolution – was different from previous ones in the region, meriting the title revolution on at least three counts: it politically altered the nature of government, abolishing the monarchy and establishing an enduring republic in its place; it carried out major socio-economic transformations, particularly in the areas of land reform and nationalization of key industries and resources; and, through re-orienting Egypt's regional and global policy, it sponsored and encouraged anti-colonial revolutionary trends across the Arab world, the African continent, and the broader tricontinental sphere.

It has often been noted that, in their first year in power, the Free Officers had no blueprint for action, lacking any clear vision.⁴⁴ This view has been forcefully challenged in recent scholarship. As Reem Abou-El-Fadl notes: 'Analysing this period reveals the Free Officers' steady development of a connected critique of colonial rule, and the social injustice and political corruption of Egypt's political condition.'⁴⁵ While the Egyptian revolution did not raise the red flag, it definitely held the red rose. In its first three years, it identified three aims: 'the eradication of political despotism, the eradication of social injustice, and getting rid of the British occupation'.⁴⁶ Nasser's primary developmental aim was for Egypt to 'become an industrial power in the shortest possible time'.⁴⁷ This entailed focusing on a 'social unity' programme. Any form of independent class struggle was not tolerated, deemed a threat to productivity and to capturing the foreign capital that was desperately needed for funding industry. The lethal suppression of the workers strike at Kafr al-Dawar a few weeks after the revolution was a case in point. Socialism was not declared an objective in Nasser's speeches until April 1955, and, even then, infrequently until after 1961. As for the 1956 Egyptian constitution, it vaguely criticized aspects of capitalism and hinted

44 In the standard English-language study of the subject, Joel Gordon, for example, tells a story of a 'military coup organized by junior officers with unfocused goals and limited ambitions' that 'became, over the course of the following decade, a revolution from above that transformed Egyptian society and reoriented the way Egyptians looked at themselves and the world'. See J. Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 4.

45 R. Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation-Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 101.

46 'Kalimat al-Bakbashi Gamal Abdel Nasser fi Um al Sharikat al-Taqteer', 27 March 1953, available at www.nasser.org/TextViewer.aspx?TextID=SPCH-13-ar, last accessed 10 December 2020.

47 R. W. Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 45.

at reform without committing to socialism.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, social policy took a more radical turn in subsequent years and this coincided with the growth of the socialist tide across the Arab world in the 1950s, a process that cannot be understood in isolation from Egyptian–Soviet relations. Soviet prestige grew immensely as a result of the combined impact of the 1955 Czechoslovakian arms deal, the USSR's funding of the Aswan High Dam, and Moscow's decisive intervention against the 1956 tripartite aggression launched by Britain, France, and Israel in the wake of Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal.

The ascendancy of Nasserism in the aftermath of Suez, which marked the beginning of the end of British colonialism in the region and the reinforcement of US imperialism, paved the way for radical changes across the Arab region, including in Iraq, Syria, and Algeria. In 1958, Iraqi officers inspired by the example of the Egyptian Free Officers overthrew the monarchy and set up the new republic. Whereas in Egypt the army was strong enough to remove civilian parties from the governing process, in Iraq the army needed support from major parties. It initially relied on the communists, which led to the early enactment of socialist policies. Despite the purge of communists after the 1963 Ba'athist coup, socialist policies continued to be passed in Iraq for much of the 1960s and 1970s.

As for Syria, the mid-1950s were characterized by the rapid growth of the communist and Ba'ath parties. Faced with internal competition with the communists and external national security pressures from NATO member Turkey in the north and the Israeli settler-colonial state in the south, the Ba'ath hastily sought unity with Nasser, resulting in the birth of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958. The Ba'ath and Nasser, however, clashed over power-sharing. Moreover, Nasser's socialist policies, including land reform and large-scale nationalization of industry, contributed to precipitating a coup that led to the break-up of the UAR in 1961. After a brief period of

48 The preamble to the constitution specified six goals: the eradication of colonialism and its collaborators; the eradication of feudalism; the eradication of monopolies and the control of capital over government; the establishment of a strong national army; the establishment of social justice; and the establishment of a correct democratic life. While some of these goals were open to socialist interpretations, relevant constitutional clauses were more concerned with *limiting* capitalist power, rather than abolishing capitalism. Article 7 demonstrated a commitment to economic planning that takes 'into account the principles of social justice', yet highlights the main goal of planning to be the 'development of production and raising the standard of living'. As for Article 8, it declared that 'private economic activity is free, as long as it does not harm the interests of society, or undermine the security of people, or assault their freedom or dignity': 'Dustour al-Jumhuriya al-Misriya', *Al-Waqa'i al-Misriya* No. 5, 16 January 1956.

economically liberal rule, subsequent governments led by the Ba'ath not only re-introduced, but also accelerated these socialist policies.⁴⁹

Nasser responded to the loss of Syria by shifting further to the left and officially embracing socialism. Earlier signs of this left turn had already been seen in Nasser's speech in Alexandria on the ninth anniversary of the revolution, and the government newspaper articles that appeared after it. Perhaps the most famous was Muhammad Hassanein Haikal's 'Communism and Us', in which he defined the main characteristics of 'Arab socialism' by articulating various ways in which it was different from communism. According to Haikal, Arab socialism, while concurring with communism on the existence of class struggle, proposed to solve the social question through dilution of class differences as opposed to the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As for individual ownership, Arab socialism, unlike communism, distinguished between its exploitative and non-exploitative forms. Arab socialism further took the individual as its starting point, allowing for enterprise as long as it does not become transformed into exploitation of others. By contrast, he argued, communism grants the state full ownership and 'the individual is nothing other than a working tool that receives only what he needs to fulfill his basic needs'.⁵⁰

The non-Marxist undertones of such Nasserist visions do not take away from their relative radicalism, especially within a regional context in which governments had hitherto placed little or no limit on individual possession, and in which the state played a minor role in the provision of welfare or socio-economic protections for the peasantry and the working class. This radicalism became all the more evident after the Syrian secession. In December 1962, the Arab Socialist Union was established as Egypt's only officially sanctioned party. In June 1962, a Charter of National Action was adopted, proclaiming socialism 'as the way to social freedom'.⁵¹ In March 1964, a provisional constitution was passed, featuring multiple references to socialism. Article 1 announced that 'the United Arab Republic is a democratic socialist state based on an alliance of the people's labouring forces'. Article 3 defined the constituent social groups of this alliance as 'the peasants, the workers, the soldiers, the intellectuals, and the national capitalists'. Article 9 stipulated that the 'economic basis of the state is the socialist system, which prevents any form of exploitation, and which

49 For the rise and fall of attempts to reverse Nasserist land reform laws, see M. J. Barout, *Al-Takawun al-Tarikhi al-Hadith li al-Jazeera al-Suriya* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Arabi li al-Abhath wa Dirasat al-Siyassat, 2013), pp. 709–13.

50 M. H. Haikal, 'Nah'nu wa al-Shyoubiyya', *Al-Ahram*, 4 August 1961.

51 A. Abdel-Malek, 'Nasserism and socialism', *Socialist Register* 1 (1964), pp. 38–55 at p. 42.

guarantees the construction of the socialist society based on the two axioms of sufficiency and justice'. Other articles focused on the delineation of property rights, state provision responsibilities, the role of the public sector, economic planning and other areas pertaining to 'socialism'.⁵²

This was the second Arab constitution, after the Algerian constitution of 1963, to officially proclaim socialism. The latter arose out of a long anti-colonial revolution led by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). Having achieved national liberation, the FLN declared that it would carry out a social revolution. Thus, Article 10 of the Algerian constitution specified several 'main goals' of the republic: 'the construction of socialist democracy, combating the exploitation of the human being in all its forms, guaranteeing the right to work and free education, and the eradication of all the residues of colonialism'.⁵³

The Political Economy of Arab Socialism

As these constitutions illustrate, the ideas and policies applied in the Arab socialist experiments in Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere were by no means systematically Marxist–Leninist. Annouar Abdel-Malek's description of Nasserist economics as 'state capitalism with a socialist vocation' may well apply to all of them.⁵⁴ Yet the swift dismissal of these policies in some scholarly narratives – unlike in Abdel Malik's somewhat nuanced account – is all too common, and all too contemptuous. It is only fair that they be taken seriously on their own terms, and on the basis of the actual socio-economic changes they brought about. This requires challenging some implicit assumptions in modernization theory and Eurocentric Marxism, both of which underplay the socialist character of Arab political economies in the post-1956 period. Both traditions characterize economic transformation brought about by forces of national liberation as reformist rather than revolutionary. Modernization theory conceptualizes Arab political economy through the lens of developmental economics and the welfare state, while Eurocentric Marxism reduces Arab socialism to state capitalism. In their final analysis, however, endogenous variables such as state bureaucratization are largely blamed for the alleged failure of the socialist experiment.

52 al-Jumhuriyya al-Arabiyya al-Mutah'ida, 'al-Dustour', *Al-Waqa'i al-Misriya*, No. 69, Supplement 1, 24 March 1964.

53 al-Jumhuriyya al-Jazae'ria al-Dimunqratiyya al-Sha'abiyya, 'al-Dustour', 1963, available at www.majliselouma.dz/index.php/ar/2016-07-19-12-56-20/2016-07-19-13-25-03/1018-1963, last accessed 1 March 2021.

54 A. Abdel-Malek, *Nation and Revolution: Volume 11 of Social Dialectics* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 4.

It is undeniable that the state, Arab or otherwise, was the predominant and imperfect instrument of economic planning and activity in the age of national liberation. Nonetheless, state-centric approaches do not adequately account for colonialism as a structural feature of international political economy. Consequently, they fail to capture the historical specificity of state formation, structural adjustments, and central planning in a colonial, not merely capitalist, context. As a result, anti-colonial socialism during the era of national liberation, including its Arab variant, is dismissed as theoretically confused or reduced to political pragmatism.

Ideological proponents and historical agents of Arab socialism were aware of such claims, but they insisted on the particularity of their socialism based on their own social reality: namely, that they encountered capitalism as colonialism. Consequently, they stressed the centrality of national sovereignty as a pre-condition of economic liberation. Sovereignty was a pre-condition for total liberation from all forms of colonialism, including neo-colonialism, which was an indirect form prevalent after independence. As Kwame Nkrumah noted, under neo-colonialism, the newly independent state had 'all the outward trappings of international sovereignty'. In reality, however, 'its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside'.⁵⁵

This meant that class struggle differed from the conventional form of the proletarian revolution in capitalist Europe. Socialist revolution was inseparable from national liberation. Class struggle was waged against a structure of economic dependency as opposed to simply being conducted against a preformed social class.⁵⁶ Restoring the dignity of the masses was achieved through ending colonial expropriation, which meant the socialization of production vis-à-vis foreign capital and its local agents.⁵⁷ Orthodox communist as well as socialist Arab movements for liberation shared this view but disagreed on the best way to achieve it. Communists called for the total severance of links

55 This understanding of neo-colonialism is foregrounded in Kwame Nkrumah's classic study *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1965). For quotes, see *ibid.*, p. ix.

56 On the inseparability of class and national struggle in a colonial setting as articulated by Arab communists, see M. Amel, *Theoretical Prolegomena to the Study of the Impact of Socialist Thought on the National Liberation Movement*, 7th edn (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013), p. 472.

57 The FLN's Tripoli programme, for instance, described the Evian accords as neo-colonialism. It acknowledged that peasants are looking for profound social and economic reform, including the restoration of their dignity, of which they had been robbed by colonial expropriation. See J. J. Byrne, 'Our own special brand of socialism: Algeria and the contest of modernities in the 1960s', *Diplomatic History* 33, 3 (2009), pp. 430–2.

with capitalist institutions and markets.⁵⁸ In contrast, and as we saw above, Arab socialism in all its varieties tolerated private property as an institution but opposed its use as a means of exploitation.⁵⁹ Prices and markets were not the ultimate arbiters of capital accumulation and distribution. Personal gain had to be subordinated to public interest, with public-sector performance tied to increasing employment, economic activity in poorer regions, and the provision of affordable goods and services to the general population.⁶⁰

Seen from this angle, Arab socialism transformed the political economy of Arab societies in fundamental ways, even if it fell short of communist revolution or diverged from classical models of socialism. New laws and practices were introduced in the spheres of agriculture, industry, and finance. They impacted relations of ownership, production, distribution, and marketing. Key energy resources like hydrocarbons and subsoil minerals, as well as strategic transport capital, like railways and waterways, were brought under national ownership and operation. The profits they generated, which previously accrued in large part to foreign monopoly capital, were invested in public works and social welfare, or directed towards manufacturing as well as other state expenditures like defence and public wages.

By modernization theory's own standards, these measures led to high levels of sustained growth coupled with reduced income inequality. This outcome was never reproduced in the neoliberal age that followed.⁶¹ Independent unionism was suppressed, but the workers and peasants made unprecedented class gains. Public sector over-expansion did lead to problems of efficiency down the line, but the sector's role in socialist transformation was pivotal. Its institutions, like agricultural co-operatives, credit agencies, and industrial managerial boards, spearheaded social mobilization for accelerated growth. The technocracy that emerged was equally significant in its push for socialist change. The

58 For Arab communists, this delinking was an aspiration, rather than an immediately achievable objective. Despite its autarkic image, even a much larger and more heavily industrialized state like the USSR found it impossible to totally break from global chains of credit and markets. For a detailed study of this theme, see O. Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

59 Nasser stressed the two principles of non-exploitative private property and equitable distribution of national output. See A. Alnasrawi, *The Economy of Iraq: Oil, Wars, Destruction of Development and Prospects, 1950–2010* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 61.

60 See M. Cammett, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), p. 240.

61 In Egypt, for example, growth rates in the 1960s hovered around 6 per cent while the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, declined from 0.61 in 1952 to 0.38 in 1965. On the Gini coefficient, see R. Mabro, *The Egyptian Economy: 1952–1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 71.

image of laconic administrators is a parody of the vibrant class of competent and committed bureaucrats and diplomats. Newly independent Arab states relied on Soviet educational aid and co-operation to replace colonial technocrats. Soviet support included the founding of research institutes in Arab countries and the sponsorship of Arab students at Soviet universities.⁶² Economic planners, including Western-educated experts, sought to build on or adopt Marxist theories of development to an Arab context. They included Oskar Lange and Mohammad Labib Shuqayr in Egypt, Michel Raptis and Suleiman Lotfallah in Algeria, Ibrahim Kubbeh in Iraq, and Abdallah Tariki in Saudi Arabia.⁶³

Agrarian Reform

Agriculture was the first sector to undergo transformations applied by such figures. The urgency of agrarian reform reflected the anti-colonial logic of socialism as a path to national liberation. Next to resource extraction, agriculture was the bedrock of colonial economic activity and therefore the strongest link in the chain of economic dependency. This can be seen in the four countries that we focus on here: Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Algeria. The reliance of these countries on large-scale farming of cash crops – cotton, dates, tobacco, and vines, respectively – created an export-oriented economy at the mercy of volatile world prices. It also diverted resources from industry, which distorted economic growth. Ottoman, Khedival, and colonial agrarian policy also gave rise to a class of big land-owners, both local and foreign, who increasingly acted as the agents of colonial rule under foreign occupation or neo-colonial rule after formal independence.

Agrarian reform was therefore a political as well an economic policy. Politically, the break-up of highly concentrated land ownership dealt a blow – in some cases gradual, in others sudden – to the landed colonial bourgeoisie

62 On the trope of administrative paralysis, see Cammett, *Political Economy of the Middle East*, p. 233.

63 On the Polish economist Oskar Lange and earlier Marxists like Sadek Saad and Ibrahim Amer, see A. Abdel Malek, *Egypt: Military Society* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 50, 109. Mohammad Labib Shuqayr held several ministerial posts like planning and the economy under Nasser and wrote on Arab economic unity, see Mohammad Labib Shuqayr, *al-Wihda al-Iqtisadiyyah: Tajarubuha wa Tawaqu'atuha* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1986). Benbella assembled a circle of leftist advisers that included several foreigners, like the French-Greek Trotskyist Michel Raptis and the Egyptian Marxist bookseller Suleiman Lotfallah, see Byrne, 'Our own special brand of socialism', p. 433. Ibrahim Kubbeh was a professor of economics at Baghdad University and served as the first minister of economy after the 1958 revolution, see I. Kubbeh, *Dirasat Fi Tarikh al-Iqtisad wa al-Fikr al-Iqtisadi* (Baghdad: Irshad Press, 1970). Abdallah Tariki was Saudi Arabia's minister of oil, a co-founder of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), and a proponent of pan-Arabism and the slogan 'Arab Oil Is for the Arabs'. See A. Tariki, *al-'Amal al-Kamilah* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2005).

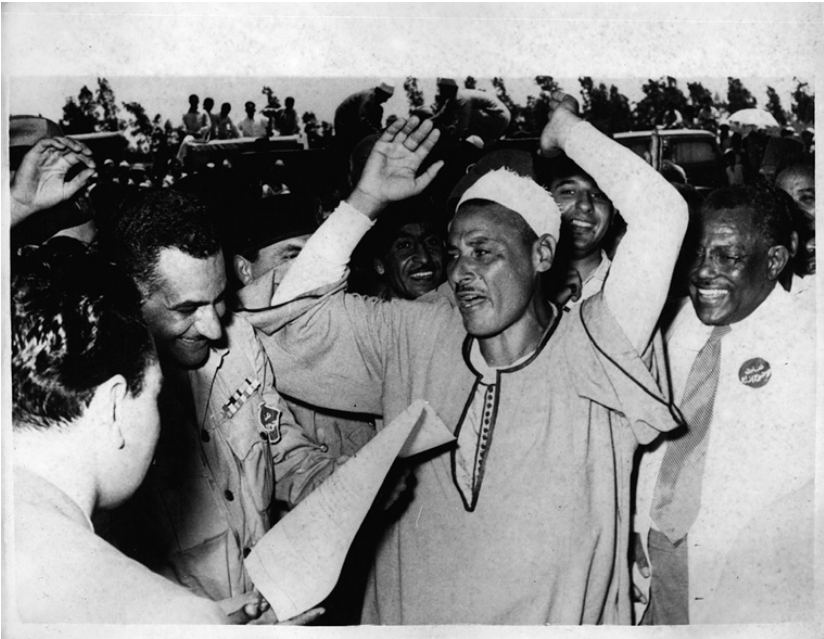


Fig. 21.1 Egypt 1954: Arab socialism turned hundreds of thousands of exploited peasants into land-owners. Transfers of title deeds were publicly celebrated. (Keystone Press/Alamy.)

while empowering medium-sized farmers and a segment of the landless peasantry. Economically, it permitted collective ways of organizing agricultural production and capital investment (Figure 21.1).

Across all four states examined here, reforms tackled the structure of ownership, tenancy arrangements, and farming practices. On the eve of the 1952 revolution in Egypt, an estimated 2,000 land-owners held close to 20 per cent of the country's total land, while at the bottom rung, 2 million owned a mere 13 per cent, which made them virtually landless.⁶⁴ Six weeks after the Free Officers took power, they enacted the first of a series of agrarian laws to address this inequality. On the expropriation side, these laws placed a ceiling on land ownership and offered compensation to original proprietors in the form of long-term and interest-bearing government bonds.⁶⁵ On the redistribution side, they tied tenancy rights to productive use of the land, outlined a monetized redistribution scheme of expropriated surplus land, and

⁶⁴ See Mabro, *Egyptian Economy*, p. 61.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 56; Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, p. 70.

created co-operatives designed to collectivize production, but not ownership, among small and middle-size farmers.⁶⁶ Subsequent laws and policy directives reduced the ceiling on ownership, rendered the terms of compensation less favourable, and improved the terms of acquisition for beneficiaries.⁶⁷ Under the new agrarian system, co-operatives were compulsory on agrarian reform estates and membership was later extended to other estates. The co-operatives took over the dual function, previously held by land-owners, of managing production – including the supply of credit, seeds, and fertilizers – and marketing output. They were organized in a top-down pyramidal fashion, with local co-operatives based on districts and grouped under a general association. A public official, often an agronomist, presided over a board that managed these co-operatives and was ultimately answerable to the ministry in Cairo.⁶⁸

The Egyptian model of agrarian reform inspired similar measures in Syria and Iraq. While the degree of mixed ownership in these two countries was relatively higher than in Egypt, nineteenth-century land registration practices by the Ottoman bureaucracy led to a high concentration of ownership coupled with immiseration of peasant life.⁶⁹ In Iraq, the British policy of empowering tribal sheikhs through land settlement strengthened resistance to land redistribution in the wake of the 1958 revolution.⁷⁰ The new reform law, enacted on 30 September 1958, stated as its first objective the elimination of ‘feudalism’ both as a mode of production and as a colonial asset that benefited the large land-owning class and their colonial patrons. Government machinery would cease to be under their political influence and serve instead the public interest: improving the living standards of the peasantry, and boosting the contribution of agriculture to national income.⁷¹ Under the new law, two different ceilings

66 Order of priority for granting land was tenants and permanent workers, farmers with large families, and the poorest members of the village; see Mabro, *Egyptian Economy*, p. 65.

67 In 1958, the annual interest rate on compensation was reduced from 3 per cent to 1.5 per cent and paid over forty rather than thirty years, while charges for redistribution were reduced from 15 per cent to 10 per cent. In 1961, the cap on private land ownership was reduced from 200 feddans to 100 feddans, and later to 50 feddans in 1969 (1 feddan is a little over 1 acre); see Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, pp. 76–7; Mabro, *Egyptian Economy*, p. 65.

68 On the structure and management of co-operatives, see Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, pp. 78–9; Mabro, *Egyptian Economy*, pp. 68–9.

69 On the lot of the peasant in pre-revolutionary Iraq, see J. Sassoon, *Economic Policy in Iraq: 1932–1950* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 169–70. On the Syrian peasant, see H. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Notables and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 38.

70 On the revival of the power of sheikhs by the British, see R. M. H. Hashemi and A. L. Edwards, ‘Land reform in Iraq: economic and social implications’, *Land Economics* 37, 1 (1961), pp. 68–81 at p. 71; and Sassoon, *Economic Policy in Iraq*, pp. 167–8.

71 Hashemi and Edwards, ‘Land reform in Iraq’, p. 75, nn. 26 and 28.

of 2,000 and 1,000 dunums were placed on ownership of irrigated and rain-fed land, respectively. Tenancy stipulations offered a clear division of labour between proprietor and tenant, collective bargaining was sanctioned, and co-operative societies were established along the lines of those in Egypt.⁷²

In Syria, major agrarian reform was initiated under the union with Egypt in 1958 and continued under the Ba'athists after succession from the UAR. The first ceiling on land ownership affected 1 per cent of land-owners, who held an estimated one-third of cultivated land. The irrigated plains across Hama and Homs as well as the al-Jazira region bore the brunt of the restructuring compared with the northern coast, the Ghuta gardens of Damascus, or the rain-fed plains of Hawran.⁷³ The peasant origins of the Ba'ath's new leadership of the 1960s onwards ensured a sustained policy of supporting agricultural production well into the beginnings of the global neo-liberal era of the 1970s. Farmers enjoyed lesser tax burdens, price subsidies, land reclamation, and material provisions in the form of seeds, fertilizers, and mechanization. Rural areas witnessed rapid electrification and the spread of safe water networks.⁷⁴ Syria became one of the most self-sufficient economies of the region, which reduced the risk of foreign economic intervention.

Algeria's FLN envisioned agrarian reform along similar but more radical lines. Differences stemmed from ideological radicalization during Algeria's prolonged armed struggle for independence, as well as the settler-colonist character of its land-owning class. No compensation was paid for estates acquired from colons or proprietors accused of treason and corruption. Mechanized farmland was not parcelled out, in order to preserve its productive capacity. More significantly, peasants took over abandoned estates in the wake of the mass exodus of colons following independence. The new occupants set up self-managed agricultural units. The FLN leadership blessed the move and hailed self-management as a continuation of the revolution. Algeria's first elected president, Ahmad Ben Bella, compared it to similar forms of socialist reform in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Co-operatives were initially controlled by peasants but were later brought under the fold of the state.⁷⁵ Public investment in rural infrastructure and a programme of building 1,000 'socialist villages' sought to increase agrarian production and reduce the rate of rural to urban migration.⁷⁶

72 Ibid., pp. 76–7. 73 Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 32. 74 Ibid., pp. 63–7.

75 See K. R. Singh, 'The Algerian experiment in socialism', *International Studies* 8, 4 (1966), pp. 444–56 at pp. 447–8.

76 On rural investment and socialist villages, see J. R. Nellis, 'Algerian socialism and its critics', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 13, 3 (1980), pp. 481–507 at p. 492.

Nationalization

These agrarian reforms were partial, yielding mixed social and economic results. They moreover targeted colonial economic exploitation indirectly, undermining the land-owning class whose interests often intersected with the interests of Western capital. The nationalization of strategic assets like the Suez Canal and natural energy sources like oil, however, was a direct attack on imperialist forces, namely, Western governments and corporations. Consequently, the stakes were higher and the confrontation more violent. Like other anti-colonial forces across the world, Arab revolutionary regimes considered control over strategic national resources a matter of political as well as economic sovereignty. No large-scale economic development was possible in the absence of such control.

The interconnectedness of seeking political and economic sovereignty was most evident in the aforementioned 1956 Suez crisis. Politically, nationalizing the Suez Canal was an assertion of Egypt's full sovereignty over a national waterway vital to international trade and controlled by Europe's leading imperialist power, Britain. Thanks to the geopolitical significance of the canal, Nasser's defiant stance was a watershed in the global and Arab struggle for economic liberation. The failure of the tripartite aggression to reverse the decision of nationalization irrevocably undermined Britain's hold in the region. Trust in Sterling was shaken after London's imposition of capital control on its Egyptian use backfired.⁷⁷ The Suez battle also gave calls for pan-Arab unity much-needed impetus.

Economically, nationalization was Nasser's defiant response to Washington's withdrawal of its pledge to fund the construction of Egypt's flagship developmental project, the Aswan High Dam. Following nationalization, Egypt's successful and orderly takeover of the canal's operations illustrated the ability of colonized peoples to run their own economic affairs within Egypt and beyond. The same year the Suez Canal was nationalized, French oil prospectors hit upon giant reserves in the Algerian Sahara.⁷⁸ The conflict over oil, which was long-standing in the Mashriq, flared up in the Maghreb. Iraq and Algeria were its respective epicentres. Both countries considered energy resources the material base for economic liberation, and following the sector's nationalization in 1971,

⁷⁷ See S. G. Galpern, *Money, Oil and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944–1971* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 161.

⁷⁸ See M. Musso, "'Oil Will Set Us Free': The Hydrocarbon Industry and the Algerian Decolonization Process', in A. W. M. Smith and C. Jeppesen (eds.), *Britain, France and the Decolonization of Africa: Future Imperfect?* (London: UCL Press, 2017), pp. 62–84 at p. 62.

earmarked its revenues for economic development and social welfare, including the wide-scale provision of health and education. The road to nationalization, however, was specific to the political economy of colonial oil exploitation in each country.

In Iraq, Abdel Karim Qasim's revolutionary government had to confront the powerful Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), a consortium of American and European corporations that monopolized oil resources. Iraq's previous monarchist administrations had struck a conciliatory tone with the IPC. Careful not to upset imperialist powers like Britain, they bargained for a greater profit share, but failed to undermine the IPC's chokehold concession over Iraq's entire territory. By contrast, Qasim unilaterally withdrew the company's concession over unexploited fields in 1961, which amounted to 99 per cent of the concessionary area, and set up a parallel public company (INOC) to develop the oil industry along national lines.⁷⁹ Once Soviet technical support and guarantees for full purchase of output were secured, the IPC was fully nationalized in 1972, and 50 per cent of the government's oil revenues were earmarked – by law – for development programmes.⁸⁰

In Algeria, the struggle over hydrocarbons also had a distinct anti-colonial tone. The French authorities saw in the new-found oil fields an opportunity to wean their economy off Gulf oil. They hoped to establish a Euro-African sphere of energy security that would act as a third power bloc next to the United States and the Soviet Union. Some officials wishfully described the Sahara as 'European Siberia', 'the land of tomorrow', and its development their generation's calling. Paris detached the desert region, which was also the site of atomic tests, from Algeria's three colonial departments and tied its administration directly to the metropole.⁸¹

Algeria's liberation movement, on the other hand, saw oil as a weapon against economic neo-colonialism. In negotiations with France, its leadership insisted on full sovereignty over the Sahara. The 1962 Evian accords granted Algeria as much, but France retained its economic privileges for excavation, extraction, and production. Supervision was placed under joint Franco-Algerian administration. The compromise was short-lived. In 1963, Algeria's new leadership established the country's national oil and gas company

79 See Alnasrawi, *The Economy of Iraq*, p. 12.

80 For details on nationalization and role of oil revenues in funding development, see M. E. Brown, 'The Nationalization of the Iraqi Petroleum Company', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, 1 (1979), pp. 107–24.

81 These officials include French diplomat Erik Labonne, and financial commissioner Pierre Cornet. See Musso, "'Oil will Set Us Free'", pp. 70–1.

(Sonatrach), which was granted new concessions for pipelines. In 1967, Ben Bella's successor, Boumédiène, nationalized US and British infrastructure in retaliation for their pro-Israel stance during the Six-Day War. Two years later, Algeria joined OPEC. In two more years, Boumédiène would also draw on Soviet technical and marketing support to nationalize the entire sector, including foreign assets in the Sahara, after France rejected Algerian demands for raising the selling price.⁸²

Recovering hydrocarbon wealth did not take place in isolation from trans-national politics. It was very much a Third Worldist and pan-Arab affair. Arab nationalist governments, led by Egypt, decried the wasteful manner in which Gulf conservative monarchical regimes spent oil revenues and demanded their investment in developing Arab markets and industry. The FLN described the battle for control over oil as 'part of the struggle of the people of the Third World for their economic liberation and the establishment of a new international economic order'.⁸³ On a regional level, the FLN also considered oil development a unifying element of the Arab Maghreb, only to be disappointed after Tunisia co-operated with French companies. The notion of 'Arab oil for the Arabs' was a common refrain across the region, not just countries with socialist leanings.

One of its renowned proponents was Abdullah Tariki. In his capacity as Saudi Arabia's oil minister, Tariki led efforts with his Venezuelan counterpart, Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso, to co-found OPEC in 1960, before falling out with the Saudi regime due to his pro-Nasserist sympathies. Tariki produced detailed studies exposing the prohibitive profits of foreign oil companies and devised formulas for profit-sharing to recuperate lost proceeds. Dubbed the red sheikh by Western media, he foresaw the need to secure oil markets with Soviet assistance as a precondition for nationalization, which in turn, was an important step towards Arab unity.⁸⁴

Industrialization and Financial Sovereignty

Industrialization was the most challenging and least successful component of economic independence. It required reversing many decades of colonial

82 On the Evian accords' oil arrangements and the subsequent path to nationalization, see Musso, "Oil Will Set Us Free", pp. 79–83.

83 Resolution of 31 December 1980 passed by the Central Committee of the FLN; see Nellis, 'Algerian socialism and its critics', p. 9.

84 On Tariki's detailed account of the possibilities of nationalizing Arab oil, see A. Tariki, 'Hal Yumkin Ta'mim al-Betrol al-Arabi', in Tariki, *al-'Amal al-Kamilah*. It was originally published in *Majallat al-Betrol wa al-Ghaz al-Arabi* [Oil and Gas Magazine] 2, 6 (March 1967).

policies that favoured foreign capital and agri-exports over domestic manufacture. Disruption of global trade networks during the Second World War did boost local production, but in a manner that primarily served the European war effort rather than the needs of Arab populations. At the end of the war, protectionist measures were scaled back. Meanwhile, global patterns of trade were partly restored to reinforce relations of dependency. Attempts by Arab and other Third World countries to sever this dependency are often reduced to a single logic of production: import substitution industrialization (ISI).⁸⁵ The policy of replacing imported goods with domestic production, whose limitations are well documented, was a prevalent philosophy of growth among newly independent nations. In socialist-leaning countries, however, it was part of a far-reaching transformation of relations of production. It impacted the redistribution of asset capital on a global, national, and even corporate scale as well as the re-organization of production at the state and market levels. This in turn led to a profound change in the levels of output, patterns of employment, distribution of income, and habits of consumption.

In Egypt, the socialization of industrial production took place after 1952 in three successive but overlapping stages. In the first phase, which lasted until the Suez crisis, administrative reforms created public organs to oversee the planning of developmental projects in infrastructure, like the Aswan High Dam, and heavy industry like the steel and iron complex at Helwan and the fertilizer plant in Aswan.⁸⁶ Private, including foreign capital, however, remained the dominant initiator of industrial activity. The nationalization of the Suez Canal marked the second phase, which largely saw the Egyptianization of foreign, namely, British and French, capital.⁸⁷ The last and most comprehensive phase began in 1958 but accelerated in 1961 and 1963. This phase impacted corporate ownership and management, commercial relations, and workers' rights. In the sphere of ownership, Egyptian private capital was nationalized on a massive scale. Three ownership structures emerged. The first was full state ownership of finance capital institutions such as banks and insurance companies as well as big industry. The second was half ownership in the field of light processing and public works, and the third consisted of public-private partnerships or full private ownership in small-scale manufacture.⁸⁸

85 On classical interpretations of import substitution and state-led industrialization, see Cammett, *Political Economy of the Middle East*, pp. 46–9.

86 The names of agencies were constantly changed; see Mabro, *Egyptian Economy*, p. 112; Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, pp. 109–11.

87 Belgian capital was also nationalized as a response to the assassination of Congolese prime minister and anti-colonial leader Patrice Lumumba; see *ibid.*, p. 127.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Commercially, market mechanisms were also subordinated to state control. A state monopsony was created in the cotton industry, and the public sector's share in cotton export firms rose to 50 per cent.⁸⁹ Other price controls were put in place, the stock exchanges of Cairo and Alexandria suspended, and tariffs on imports sustained to ward off foreign competition. Managerial relations and profit-sharing were also transformed at the corporate, industry, and national levels. At the corporate level, limited or joint-stock companies were required to allocate 5 per cent of their profits to the purchase of government bonds and 25 per cent to employees and workers, including 5 per cent for housing and 10 per cent for social security. Boards of directors were limited to seven members, including two representatives of employees and workers, respectively. Compensation for executives was capped at £5,000 and stock shares at £10,000. At the sectoral and national levels, state industrial activity was run by a pyramidal structure of ministries and public agencies. Plans were set within a three- or five-year frame.⁹⁰ The ambitious plan of 1960 aimed at doubling national income in the span of ten years.⁹¹ It generated 1 million jobs and achieved an average growth rate of 6 per cent.⁹²

The third wave of nationalization dealt a heavy blow to the upper bourgeoisie, including Egypt's two most powerful monopolies, the Mitr and Abboud groups.⁹³ A similar pattern unfolded in Syria after 1963, whereby the nationalization of banks and large enterprises resumed on a much wider scale.⁹⁴ Iraq followed a similar path. After 1963, a succession of Ba'athist and Nasserist figures gained the upper hand in government, continuing economic policies that started under Qasim. All of Iraq's banks and thirty-two large industrial and commercial enterprises were nationalized. The country's industrial organization became increasingly aligned with Egypt's model. Top-down public agencies, including state-managed banks, ran the production of textiles, metals, and chemicals. Companies were required to share 25 per cent of their profits with their labourers and employees, as well as grant representation on the board of directors.⁹⁵ The state's share in the output of big manufacturing concerns and in employment jumped to 62 per cent and

89 Mabro, *Egyptian Economy*, p. 129. 90 Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, pp. 152–3.

91 Ibid., pp. 109, 153. 92 Cammett, *Political Economy of the Middle East*, p. 242.

93 On the oligopolistic powers of these two groups, see Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, pp. 111–15.

94 For a list of companies nationalized in the third wave of 1963, see S. Moubayid, *Abdel Nasser wa al-Ta'mim. Waq'i al-Inqilab fi Suriya* (Beirut: Riyad el-Rayyes Books, 2019), p. 88. On the popular protest against reversing nationalization measures, see *ibid.*, p. 76.

95 Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 1031.

46 per cent, respectively.⁹⁶ Thanks to foreign exchange generated by oil revenues, Iraq and Algeria did not face severe financing shortages. In Algeria, oil and gas served as the feedstock for a modern petrochemicals industry. Energy export earnings bankrolled the import of plant and capital goods necessary for heavy industry like steel manufacturing and vehicle assembly. Collaboration with foreign capital focused on turnkey projects and technical assistance, with no foreign direct investment.

Opposition to foreign direct investment and the encouragement of national development was part of a long struggle for economic nationalism dating back to the nineteenth century.⁹⁷ What distinguished this process under Arab socialism was the role of government in the management of capital investment, that is, credit and production. Autonomous state decision-making in the sphere of the economy, or economic sovereignty, was a key prerequisite for national liberation. Anti-colonial governments were keen to acquire such autonomy. Financial autonomy, namely, control over capital flows and regulation of credit and monetary relations, was rightly considered the most sensitive and significant lever of economic sovereignty. Both financial mechanisms were handled by central banks, which became a major site of struggle over the future of national economic development.⁹⁸ Under colonial rule, private and foreign-owned banks, or European-based currency boards, took on the role of central banking. After independence, most Arab countries nationalized these banks or set up new ones. These banks shared basic objectives like currency issue and stabilization. But their mandate and impact on economic development varied across the region. Countries with a market-oriented economy, like Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan, restricted the ability of central banks to expand credit in the service of development. Countries with socialist policies or state-led planning, like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, did the opposite. Their nationalized or newly established central banks acted not only as a primary regulator of credit but, in the words of Iraq's then central bank governor Abdel Hasan Zalzal, also as a planner of economic activity as a whole. In Iraq, the bank's policy was additionally envisioned to expand the productive base of the economy to reduce its dependency on oil.⁹⁹

96 Cammett, *Political Economy of the Middle East*, p. 245.

97 On economic nationalism in Egypt, see A. Azziz Ezzelarab, *European Control and Egypt's Traditional Elites: A Case Study in Elite Economic Nationalism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

98 On the distinction between economic nationalism and economic sovereignty, see H. Safieddine, *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 12–13.

99 Ibid., pp. 110–11.

Arab Socialism and Culture

Besides its economic role, Arab socialism was a force of cultural ferment and transformation. New and radical schools of artistic expression flourished in the realm of literature, cinema, theatre, and music. In Egypt, movie-making before the 1952 revolution was largely profit-oriented. Commercial productions often focused on sentimental melodramas. In the 1950s, a new trend of realist cinema with a high level of social and political consciousness emerged. Its leading advocates, like film-makers Salah Abu-Seif and Yousif Chahine, dealt with themes of capitalist exploitation, social injustice, and sexual repression. They employed avant-garde filming and editing techniques that rendered the movies of high artistic, rather than mere propagandist, value and garnered international recognition. Their cinematic philosophy was eventually articulated and published in 1966 in Egypt's leftist monthly, *Al-Tali'a* (*The Vanguard*). The state and public sector actively supported this new cinema. Government agencies like the Egyptian General Organization of Cinema offered training for new scriptwriters and financed iconic productions like Chahine's *The Land* and Tawfiq Saleh's *The Rebels*. West European- and Soviet-trained instructors like renowned actor Mahmoud Moursi returned to Egypt and taught at the Higher Institute of Cinema. Graduates of state-sponsored art schools like Sana' Jamil and Samiha Ayoub turned into highly revered and fiercely independent actresses who left their indelible mark on cinema and theatre, with Ayoub becoming director of the National Theatre in the late 1970s. The ministry of culture also published a monthly journal and cine-clubs were founded in Cairo and Alexandria, offering urban audiences the opportunity to view movie productions from around the world.¹⁰⁰

Poetry and literary criticism were also subject to experimentation in form and subject matter. Egyptian poets like Abd al-Rahman Abnudi, Ahmad Fouad Negm, and Salah Jahin, who was also a playwright and cartoonist, popularized colloquial Arabic poetry that until then was regarded as inferior to traditional verse within urban bourgeois circles. These poets imbued their

100 On Ayoub's role and fame, see 'New Book Celebrates Egypt's Famed Actress Samiha Ayoub', available at <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/190291/Arts-Culture/Stage-Street/New-book-celebrates-Egypt%E2%80%99s-famed-actress-Samiha-A.aspx>, last accessed 2 April 2021. On the iconic Sanaa Gamil, see M. Marie, '5th SIFTY bears name of legendary Sanaa Gamil', *Egypt Today*, 18 February 2020, available at <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/81779/5th-SIFTY-bears-name-of-legendary-Sanaa-Gamil>, last accessed 2 April 2021. For all other references, see Q. Samak, *MERIP* No. 56 (April 1977), pp. 12–15. See also B. Wharton, 'Cultivating cultural change through cinema; Youssef Chahine and the creation of national identity in Nasser's Egypt', *Africana* 3, 1 (2009), pp. 31–55.

works with social commentary and national fervour, and many of them were lyricized and performed by politically committed musicians like Sheikh Imam or rising radio and television stars like Um Kalthoum and Abdel Halim Hafiz.¹⁰¹ Um Kalthoum and Hafiz were regularly featured on Cairo's pan-Arab radio station, Voice of the Arabs, which was also a major vehicle of pan-Arab mobilization across the Arab region.¹⁰²

Across Sinai in Bilad al-Sham, poetic and literary forms of expression were also the centre of debate between two of Beirut's leading literary magazines, *Shi'r* and *al-Adab*. *Shi'r*'s celebration of prose poetry was associated with a liberal trend of seeking art for art's sake. By contrast, *al-Adab*'s founder and Arab nationalist Suhail Idriss emphasized the independent yet social and political dimension of literature. *Al-Adab*'s position was informed by the existential concept of *iltizam* (commitment), best articulated by literary critic Raif Khoury, co-founder of the communist movement's journal of record *al-Tariq*, and practised by avant-garde novelists like Egypt's Sonallah Ibrahim, who reportedly wrote letters of support to Nasser while imprisoned for his communist sympathies.¹⁰³ The 1967 military defeat led to a further radicalization of the literary scene in Beirut in the face of revisionist cultural trends that sought to undermine Arab civilization and the entire socialist experiment as causes of defeat.¹⁰⁴ A leading voice was Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani, whose stories embodied a new wave of realism that centred on the experience of revolutionary struggle as part of a universalist pursuit of justice with all its contradictions, defeats, and triumphs. Significantly, Kanafani played an important political role; until his assassination by Mossad, he

101 On colloquial poetry, see W. Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 37–63; N. Radwan, 'Palestine in Egyptian colloquial poetry', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, 4 (2011), pp. 61–77. On Um Kalthoum, see V. Sahhab and E. Sahhab, *Mawsou'at Umm Kalthoum*, vol. 111 (Hazmiyeh: Mousiqat al-Sharq, 2003). On Sheikh Imam, see Sh. al-Nabulsi, *al-Aghani fi al-Maghani: al-Sheikh Imam Issa, Sira Faniyya wa Musiqiyya*, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-Mouassassa al-Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1998).

102 On the foundation of Voice of the Arabs, see F. al-Deeb, *Abdel Nasser wa Tahrir al-Mashriq al-'Arabi. Shahadat Fathi al-Deeb* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Istratiyya wal-Siyasiyya bil Ahram, 2000).

103 On the rivalry between *Shi'r* and *al-Adab* and the discourse of 'iltizam', see the *al-Adab* special issue on its founder Suhail Idriss, vol. 56 (2008), available at https://www.al-adab.com/sites/default/files/aladab_2008_v56_01-03_0006_0065.pdf, last accessed 2 April 2021; A. Spanos, 'Mediating "iltizam": the discourse on translation in the early Yyars of 'al-Adab'', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 37 (2017), pp. 110–39. On Raif Khoury's committed literature, see R. Khoury, *al-Adab al-Mas'ul* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1989). On Sonallah Ibrahim, see S. Salem, *Anti-Colonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 120. More generally on Arab intellectuals under Nasser, see S. Idriss, *al-Muthaqqaf al-'Arabi wa al-Sulta. Bahth fi Riwayat al-Tajrubah al-Nasiriyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2003).

104 On Beirut's cultural scene, see Z. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

was the spokesperson for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Other socialist authors also held significant leadership positions, including the novelist and poet May Sayigh, who was the secretary general of the General Union of Palestinian Women.¹⁰⁵

Further east, Baghdad's intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s came from under the 'overcoat' of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). These intellectuals included poets like Abdel Wahhab al-Bayati and Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, archaeologist Tahir Baqir, fiction writers Dhunun Ayyub and Fuad al-Takarli, literary critics Ali Jawad al-Tahir and Nazik al-Aaraji, and economists like Muhammad Salman Hassan. They contributed to the formation of a secular, cosmopolitan, and largely leftist cultural current, serving as a catalyst for revolution. In the wake of the 1958 revolution, prominent women and men of this movement became part of the ideological and administrative apparatus of the state. They also dominated civil society associations like the writers' and teachers' unions. Marxist publications like cultural journals *al-Muthaqqaf* (*The Intellectual*) and *al-Adib al-Iraqi* (*The Iraqi Writer*), as well as the ICP's newspaper, *Ittihad al-Sha'b*, garnered wide readership. Qasim sought to curb the ascending influence of an independent cultural left towards the end of his time in office, when polarization between communists and pan-Arabists reached its zenith. The ascension of the Ba'ath Party to power in the wake of 1963 coup led to a large-scale crackdown and purge of communists. Major cultural figures like poets Mudhaffar al-Nawwab, Buland al-Haydari, and the 'people's poet' Muhammad Salih Bahr al-Ulum, as well as fiction writers like Safira Hafez, were exiled, detained, or put in prison. Others like journalist Abu-Said were tortured to death. The cultural influence of socialist thought in both Iraq and Syria remained present throughout the 1960s, but, due to persecution, it never fully recovered, and turned exilic in later decades.¹⁰⁶

Arab Socialism and Gender

Arab socialism was equally transformative in the realm of gender relations. The left, broadly defined, played an important role in the history of the Arab

¹⁰⁵ For details on the culture of the Palestinian liberation movement, see K. Nabulsi and A. R. Takriti, *The Palestinian Revolution* (Oxford: University of Oxford Department of Politics and International Relations, 2016), available at learnpalestine.politics.ox.ac.uk, last accessed 6 April 2021.

¹⁰⁶ On Iraq's leftist culture, see Y. Salaam, 'On the Decline of the Leftist Intelligentsia in Iraq', *Europe Solidaire San Frontières*, 29 August 2007. For the afterlives of the exile suffered by much of Iraq's leftist milieu, see Z. Saleh, *Return to Ruin: Iraqi Narratives of Exile and Nostalgia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

women's movement. Marxist and socialist feminisms and the spaces created by them contributed substantially to women's participation in political, economic, and social struggles, especially after the 1940s. Influential literature focuses on socialist failures rather than contributions. Failures were real. For much of the twentieth century, Arab communist and socialist parties were male-dominated, especially within the upper echelons of leadership, and there were many instances in which they prioritized various political, economic, and social agendas over women's liberation.¹⁰⁷ The same could be generally said for Arab socialist states, and, indeed, for many socialist states across the world.

A considerable amount of research on Arab feminism has painted a more complex picture, one in which numerous socialist struggles and policies were advantageous for the cause of gender equality.¹⁰⁸ Despite considerable patriarchal residues within them and immense social obstacles surrounding them, communist parties, and later Arab socialist ones, opened their membership to women well before other major political formations in the region. In the case of the Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian communist parties, for example, this took place as early as the mid-1930s.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, women's membership tended to be extremely low in the 1930s and 1940s, often relying on recruitment amongst the relatives of male communists and socialists.¹¹⁰

The situation improved substantially after the 1950s as leftist parties began to include a large number of women graduating from teachers' colleges and universities. Moreover, party women as well as fellow travellers were able to set up associations that were unprecedentedly radical in their feminist as well as socialist and anti-colonial demands, conceptualizing the struggles against class exploitation, colonialism, and patriarchy as indivisibly interlinked. In Egypt, the communist-affiliated League of Women Students and Graduates from the University and Egyptian Institutes (est. 1944/5) committed itself to

107 M. Abi Sa'ab, *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), p. 74.

108 The complex reception of the socialist era by the contemporary Egyptian women's movement is explored in N. Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 86–127.

109 The role of women in the Syrian–Lebanese Communist Party and the broader socialist circles surrounding it during the interwar period is discussed in S. Tannoury-Karam, 'The Making of a Leftist Milieu: Anti-Colonialism, Anti-Fascism, and the Political Engagement of Intellectuals in Mandate Lebanon, 1920–1948', PhD dissertation, Northeastern University, 2017, pp. 176–233.

110 For the involvement of women in the Palestinian communist National Liberation League, and its limitations, in the 1940s, see F. Abdelhadi (ed.), *Adwar al-Mar'a al-Filastiniyya fi al-Arba'eeniyat. Al-Musahama al-Siyassiyya li al-Mar'a al-Filastiniyya* (al-Bireh [Palestine]: Markaz al-Mar'a al-Filastiniyya li al-Abhath wa al-Tawtheeq, 2006), p. 42.

'struggle for the widest freedoms, struggle for liberation from oppression, hunger and aggression; struggle by ourselves and for ourselves; struggle to create a free noble life for Egyptian women under the sovereignty of a free and noble country'.¹¹¹ A much larger formation in Iraq, the Iraqi Women's League, was founded by communist women in the 1940s, and could count membership in the thousands by the 1950s.¹¹²

Additionally, the political programmes of communist and Arab socialist parties featured a much stronger commitment to women's rights than did those of their liberal and conservative counterparts. This was especially witnessed in the post-independence period. Arab communist and socialist parties included explicit, albeit sometimes patronizing, commitments to women's rights in their political programmes. The Ba'ath Party constitution of 1947, for instance, insisted that 'the Arab woman shall enjoy all the rights of the citizen. The party shall struggle to raise her level so that she is worthy of these rights.' A more progressive stance can be found in Communist Party programmes. The Jordanian Communist Party, to give one example, advocated in its first political programme of 1951 the 'struggle to liberate Jordanian women from reactionary chains, and to equate them with men in all political, economic, and social matters'.¹¹³ From the 1950s to the 1970s, these commitments were reflected in the level of political symbolism. Across the Arab world, few men could claim to match the iconic status of the FLN's Jemilah Buherid or the PFLP's Laila Khaled.

On a different level, Arab communist and socialist parties were active in the battle for women's suffrage across the region. In Lebanon, the communists played an important role in achieving the franchise for women in 1951, largely as a result of the struggles of feminists like Emily Faris Ibrahim, who had fought for that right in the communist press throughout the 1940s, and was the first Arab woman to stand for parliamentary elections in 1953.¹¹⁴ In pre-socialist Syria, the parties of the left played an important role in expanding the limited franchise to include women in 1949, and in achieving equal franchise and the right to stand for election in 1953.

111 S. Botman, 'The experience of women in the Egyptian communist movement, 1939–1945', *Women's Studies International Forum* 11, 2 (1988), pp. 117–26 at p. 123.

112 The organization was initially founded in the mid-1940s as the League for the Defence of Women's Rights. It changed its name to the Iraqi Women's League in 1958. Its non-communist counterpart was the Iraqi Women's Union, which was founded in 1945. For more details, see Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

113 J. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 95.

114 Tannoury-Karam, 'The Making of a Leftist Milieu', p. 176.

As for the socialist states, their many achievements and failures are reflected in the complexities of the Nasser era in Egypt. Mervat Hatem's analysis of 'state-feminism' in this period still rings true. Under Nasser, Egypt witnessed the erasure of legal gender discrimination in the fields of education and employment, and the state's recruitment of women into schools, universities, and bureaucratic positions. This resulted in an unprecedented growth of women's social mobility and a substantial increase in their economic empowerment. Yet there was a failure in changing personal status laws that discriminated against women.¹¹⁵ Nasser's government attempted to amend these laws on multiple occasions, particularly after the appointment of a feminist, Hikmat Abu Zayd, as minister of social affairs. However, the amendments proposed by her and other women were withdrawn under the combined pressure of conservative religious opposition and major political events, particularly the break-up of the United Arab Republic in 1961 and the defeat in the 1967 War.¹¹⁶

In Iraq, there was an earlier, and more resolute, will to change personal status laws, especially under the influence of the Iraqi Communist Party. After the 1958 revolution, the only communist member to be represented in Qasim's cabinet was Naziha al-Dulaimi, who became the first woman cabinet minister of an Arab state. Working with the Iraqi Women's League, she successfully managed to enact the most progressive personal status law in the entire region, introducing gender equality in sensitive matters like inheritance. This law, however, was reversed after the coup against Qasim, with Ba'athist figures playing the major role in this reversal, illustrating the failure to couple gender equality in the political and labour spheres with personal status reforms. The only socialist Arab country to create long-lasting change in this field was South Yemen, but even that change was reversed after the North Yemeni victory in the 1994 war that resulted in the unification of North and South Yemen.¹¹⁷

Such experiences led socialist feminists like the late Nawal El Saadawi to note that 'the path to socialism is also the path to the joint liberation of women and men. In his denial of the freedom of the woman, man denies his own freedom, and the same applies to the feudalist or capitalist who denies the freedom of the worker.' Nevertheless, 'many socialist rulers misunderstood this fundamental fact, detaching the cause of women's freedom from the cause of the liberation of peasants and workers, imagining that the eradication of

115 M. Hatem, 'The enduring alliance of nationalism and patriarchy in Muslim personal status laws: the case of modern Egypt', *Feminist Issues* 6, 1 (1986), pp. 19–41.

116 F. Najjar, 'Egypt's laws of personal status', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10, 3 (1988), pp. 322–3.

117 For a detailed examination of the South Yemeni case, see S. Dahlgren, *Contesting Realities: The Public Space and Morality in South Yemen* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

ownership and nationalization decrees will automatically lead to human liberation or the liberation of women. This is the error that was committed by most Arab rulers who raised the slogans of socialism and nationalization.¹¹⁸

Socialism and Islamic Political Currents

The struggles over personal status laws illustrated the enduring strength of conservative religious currents even under socialism. Yet in a clear sign of the intellectual and social hegemony of Arab socialism at the time, prominent Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, Mustafa al-Sibai in Syria, and Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq debated socialism at length. They did so while actively seeking to consolidate religious political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Da'wah Party, both of which competed with communism and socialism for mass followings. These thinkers ascribed certain socialist values to Islam based on the principle of 'social solidarity' (*al-Takaful al-Ijtimai*'), critiqued the excesses of capitalism like usury and extreme wealth, and opposed European colonialism. While Qutb couched Islamic socialism in capitalist terminology like equality of opportunity,¹¹⁹ al-Sibai explicitly supported socialist measures in Syria like nationalization and land redistribution on the premise of 'social necessity', but without forgoing the basic principle of the right to private property.¹²⁰ Baqr al-Sadr offered the most detailed and theoretically inclined critique of dialectical materialism as the flawed basis of socialism. Having reduced Marxism to materialism and its economist interpretations, Sadr sought to construct an alternative system to both capitalism and socialism that combined private rights with social justice.¹²¹ As the 1970s and 1980s progressed, witnessing the growth of the regional role of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, as well as changes taking place within the Islamic Republic of Iran under the influence of more economically conservative figures like Rafsanjani, these socialist influences

118 N. El Saadawi, *al-Wajh al-'Aari li al-Mara'a al-Arabiya* (Windsor: Hindawi Books, 2017 [1977]), p. 139.

119 Qutb argued that absolute justice decreed a disparity of income, since people by nature were unequal in abilities, and a harmonious balance required that they achieve the full potential of their talents, see W. Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 36–7.

120 Al-Sibai was professor of Islamic Jurisprudence and Personal Status Law at Damascus University. On his support of socialist reforms, see M. al-Siba'i, *Ishtirakiyyat al-Islam* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qawmiyyah li al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1960), pp. 101, 108.

121 Sadr posited three principles as the basis of Islamic economics: three-tiered ownership structure of property (public, private, and state); economic freedom on a limited scale; and social justice, see M. Baqir al-Sadr, *Iqtisaduna* (Beirut: Dar al-Ta'aruf lil Matbu'at wa al-Nashr, 1987).

on Islamic thought waned, and neoliberal religious interpretations grew. This corresponded to a general retreat from socialism.

Conclusion: Socialist Declines and Renewals

The decline of Arab socialism is frequently attributed to the momentous military debacle of 1967. A straight line is drawn from Nasser's defeat to Sadat's open market *infatih* policy.¹²² This teleological analysis does not accord with the historical record. The post-1967 years saw a sharp turn to the left on the part of several major revolutionary movements in the region.¹²³ A case in point is the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN). Offshoots of MAN that emerged after 1967 – including the leadership that won the independence struggle in South Yemen, the PFLP in Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf that led the Dhufar revolution – blamed the defeat not on state socialism per se, but on the petit bourgeois composition of the revolutionary governments that led the socialist experiment. These governments were condemned for not being radical enough.¹²⁴ Prominent Marxist ideologues like Hussein Mroue were also quick to point out that the defeat was not cultural or civilizational but military, and a direct consequence of concerted imperialist efforts to destroy national liberation movements.¹²⁵ At the state level, there was continuation or acceleration of socialist policies in Iraq, Algeria, and South Yemen, with the latter adopting a Marxist–Leninist approach after 1969. Qaddafi's 1969 coup in Libya was also modelled after Egypt's Free Officers, although Libyan policies later took a markedly mercurial character drawing on the eclectic and often incoherent abstractions of Qaddafi's Green Book and his 'Third International Theory'.

The existence of these post-1967 socialist-inspired experiments does not alter the fact that the Six-Day War definitely produced a political setback as

122 For instance, the late historian Roger Owen argued that the defeat signalled the 'bankruptcy of the secular, Arab socialist, post-independence, self-styled revolutionary regimes themselves': R. Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 19.

123 For a recent edited collection that explores various aspects of this process, see L. Guirguis (ed.), *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s–1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

124 A. R. Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 84–131; W. Kazzuha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and His Comrades from Nationalism to Communism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1975), pp. 65–101.

125 H. Mroueh, 'Tariquna ila Taghyeer al-Insan al-'Arabi', *al-Adab* 7/8 (1985), pp. 34–7.

well as an economic crisis, especially in Egypt. The second half of the decade witnessed a sharp decline in industrial growth rates, which cannot be detached from the heavy military spending that took place as a result of the 1967 War, the subsequent war of attrition, and the loss of revenue due to the ensuing closure of the Suez Canal (1967–1973).¹²⁶ These dire developments forced Nasser to seek a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regimes. Geopolitical reconciliation with conservative forces, however, did not translate into a speedy dismantlement of the socialist apparatus. That took place several years later in the wake of Nasser's death, not defeat, and the subsequent change of leadership. Under Sadat, Egypt's drift to the American camp in the aftermath of the 1973 War bought new geopolitical and geo-economic configurations into play.

The 1973 War granted conservative Gulf regimes unprecedented economic power. The Arab oil embargo in retaliation for Western support of Israel contributed to a meteoric rise in energy prices. In the Gulf Arab states, there was a massive excess of surplus capital that was too large for local economies to absorb. This augmented the phenomenon of Gulf capital. While most of this capital was invested in Western economies, there was also substantial export to neighbouring Arab states.¹²⁷ Much of this wealth was used to contain revolutionary currents within the Gulf and elsewhere.¹²⁸ This was the material basis upon which regional conservative currents, including religious ones, drew to achieve ideological dominance in the 1980s at the expense of the Arab left. The 1982 expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon by invading Israeli forces dealt another major blow to radical revolutionary struggles long inspired by the Palestinian national liberation movement.

The post-1973 oil revenues also benefited socialist oil-rich states like Algeria and Iraq. Much of this income was channelled internally into development projects and welfare provision. The Ba'ath government in Baghdad, however, also spent heavily on the military, initiating a destructive war with post-revolutionary Iran. For its part, Iran confronted Arab socialism with serious ideological and material challenges. As the first country in modern history to

126 S. Soliman, *State and Industrial Capitalism in Egypt* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2005), p. 11.

127 For an extensive study of this process and its ramifications, see A. Hanieh, *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). See also O. Alshehaby, *Tasdeer al-Tharwa wa Ightirab al-Insan. Tarikh al-Khalala al-Intaji fi Duwal al-Khaleej al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wih'dah al-Arabiyya, 2018).

128 Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, pp. 261–309; R. Baheer, 'A counterrevolutionary state: popular movements and the making of Saudi Arabia', *Past and Present* 238 (2018), pp. 233–77.

declare a revolutionary Islamic orientation, it actively solicited transnational connections around its clerical leadership and explicitly opposed US imperialism in the region. This inspired all sorts of political activists, including religious figures like former Muslim Brother Fathi al-Shiqaqi (founder of Islamic Jihad), as well as Marxist thinkers like the Palestinian Fateh revolutionary Munir Shafiq, who even converted, in the wake of the Iranian revolution, from Christianity to Shi'a Islam.

More significantly for the internal mobilizational politics of the left, the impact of the Iranian revolution was heavily felt among the Shi'a populations of Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. In all of these countries, communist and Arab socialist parties drew heavily on marginalized, often rural or recently urbanized, constituencies that had a substantial Shi'a composition. Khomeini's Islamic challenge, generously funded and ideologically nurtured by a major oil-producing state, not only affected the left's recruitment prospects but also drained its existing reservoir of cadres. Iran's clerical leadership was felt well beyond Shi'a political networks, vindicating Islamic currents of all shades, including those deriving from the Muslim Brotherhood. Secular anti-colonial contexts were not immune to these changes. In Palestine, after the establishment of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in 1987, socialist movements like the PFLP lost substantial ground to it in key areas like Gaza.

Here and elsewhere, Islamic currents were the traditional competitors of the broader Arab socialist camp. They had long been sponsored by Saudi Arabia, especially after the clash, in the wake of the 1962 Yemeni revolution, between President Nasser and King Faisal Al Saud.¹²⁹ On the international stage, the latter established the Organization of the Islamic Conference to counter the Arab League. Domestically, throughout the 1960s, King Faisal reversed an earlier decade of nascent social liberalization, carrying the banner of religion as the ideological alternative to pan-Arabism and Arab socialism. In the 1980s, the Saudi-sponsored varieties of Islam had to take mobilizational forms that could counter the Khomeini-inspired variants from Tehran, as well as fulfil renewed Cold War anti-communist functions, particularly in Afghanistan, the last country in which the Brezhnev Doctrine was implemented. In the face of the 1979 Soviet intervention in support of the Afghani communist state, the US

129 For the Saudi welcoming of Muslim Brotherhood exiles from Egypt and their role in its religious 'Sahwa' (revival), see S. Lacroix, *Awakening Dissent: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

anti-communist crusade depended on mobilizing globally for an Islamic holy war. Through US-allied regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Salafi Jihadi currents were recruited, funded, trained, and armed across the Arab region and beyond. Besides their puritanical outlook, iconoclastic orientation, literalist interpretations, and obsession with doctrinal fidelity, these currents – the forerunners of al-Qaida and ISIS – were fiercely opposed to socialism as well as to pan-Arabism in all their varieties.

For all their secular outlook and general opposition to religious currents, Arab states that retained vestiges of socialism, or at least verbal allegiance to it, like Algeria, Syria, and Iraq, were not immune to instrumentalizing these currents in order to maintain popular consent for undemocratic rule or to attain geopolitical aims. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Iraqi Ba'ath government, despite suppressing all religious parties within its domains, was a major backer of the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency against the Syrian Ba'ath government. Following the Gulf War and the US siege of the 1990s, it relied heavily on internal religious legitimation mechanisms, going as far as adding the Islamic emblem 'God is Greater' to Iraq's flag. As for the Syrian Ba'ath government, it sided with the Islamic Republic of Iran in its war with Iraq; aided at various junctures Islamic resistance groups like Hizbullah and Hamas that were locked in battle with the Israeli occupation forces in south Lebanon and Palestine; and sponsored Salafi Jihadi currents after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

This brings us to a key feature of the Arab socialist odyssey, one that was experienced elsewhere on the globe, namely, the intensification of statist political culture, driven by the logics of regime survival and state securitization in the face of ongoing neo-colonial threats as well as internal erosion of political legitimacy. In this context, socialist visions built on universal principles of equal citizenship were often undermined by immediate regime needs that required tapping into pre-existing structures of social segmentation. In some cases, like South Yemen and Libya, this phenomenon took localized regional and tribal forms; in others, like Iraq and Syria, they assumed complex and often intermingling regional, sectarian, and ethnic dimensions. These dynamics undermined the prospects of political democratization, which was proclaimed by all socialist regimes as an ideal, but one that was regularly deferred.

If this deferral was legitimated in the post-independence period by serious revolutionary pursuits of economic justice or anti-colonial liberation, the sweeping reality of post-1970s neoliberalism undermined these bases of

political legitimacy. As a global phenomenon, neoliberalism is rightly traced to milestones like the overthrow of Allende's socialist and democratically elected government in Chile. But the Arab region witnessed similar tidings. Sadat's *infitah* took place at the same time as the rise of Pinochet and the Chicago Boys. All of the ten classic principles of the Washington Consensus were implemented, albeit to varying degrees, in the socialist Arab countries, leading to the dismantlement of many of the public institutions and initiatives described throughout this chapter.¹³⁰ Neoliberalization was pursued at varying points, differing in extent, timing, and motivation if not in basic qualitative features. In Algeria, the 1979 FLN Fourth Conference ushered in a long post-Boumédiène transition into so-called 'market socialism'. Decline in oil prices in the 1980s further led to the unravelling of major industrialization programmes as well as welfare initiatives. This was accompanied by the growth of a transnational political Islamic current that fed on the growing malaises of unemployment, lumpen-proletarianization, and bureaucratic corruption. Attempts to absorb these pressures through political liberalization crashed miserably. When the FLN was defeated at the ballot box by the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front) in December 1991, the election was annulled and the country descended into a long and devastating civil war. By the time the Islamic insurgency was destroyed in the early 2000s, Algeria was more open than ever to the global neoliberal economy.¹³¹

In Syria, there was also an incremental transition that began with two waves of economic liberalization initiated under Hafez al-Assad, but picked up pace during the presidency of Bashar al-Assad.¹³² Between 2000 and 2005, more than 1,200 laws and decrees were issued to enhance the business environment and attract foreign and local investment.¹³³ Locally, this process produced a consolidation of capital in the hands of the 'Big 100' businessmen who had come to dominate the economy, many of whom were connected to the state leadership through kinship or economic ties.¹³⁴ While growth figures throughout the first decade of the millennium were relatively high, they were accompanied by a marked rise in income inequality, unemployment, and poverty, precipitated by the gradual economic retreat of the state and its diminishment in size. Such problems were further exacerbated by

130 As is well known, these ten principles were elaborated in J. Williamson, *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened?* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1990).

131 J. McDougal, *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 324.

132 M. J. Barout, *Al-Akd al-Akhir fi Tarikh Suriya. Jadaliyat al-Jumoud wa al-Islah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Arabi li al-Abhath wa Dirasat al-Siyassat, 2012), p. 30.

133 *Ibid.*, p. 48. 134 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

severe drought, reduced state support for agriculture, and heightened US financial sanctions seeking to isolate Syria economically. In line with all the other formerly Arab socialist countries that were languishing under the debilitating combination of economic liberalism, unyielding political repression, and a demoralizing weakness of sovereignty, Syria witnessed a wide-scale popular uprising in 2011 that eventually descended into a horrific and ongoing internationalized civil war.

The broader wave of uprisings could not be detached from the social unravelling and regional hyper-sectarianization that was ushered in by the US invasion of Iraq, a country in which the immiserating impact of prolonged and deadly sanctions far outweighed that of neoliberalism. This unravelling of Arab socialism was equally tied to the political and economic crisis of the Soviet Union, which eventually led to its collapse in 1991. The Soviet absence was ideologically debilitating: the very existence of a socialist great power on the world stage was crucial for socialist and communist parties the world over, even if its model of 'actually existing socialism' had long been questioned. Materially, in the Arab region and elsewhere, the Soviet absence further deprived socialist countries and parties of a major source of armaments, credit, and diplomatic support. None of these countries ever had the scale or capacity to fully de-link from the global economic or political systems. Their key geopolitical position on the world map, their hydrocarbon riches, and the presence of Israel as a settler-colonial project sponsored by US imperialism in their midst further drained their resources, undermined attempts at internal reform, and rendered them increasingly subject to US political, economic, and, at times, military power.

Amidst a geopolitical and socio-economic atmosphere marked by imperialist dominance, settler-colonial expansion, statist politics, neoliberal economics, gender oppression, deep social fissures, and working-class marginalization, one cannot speak of the existence of meaningful socialist policies in any Arab country today. This is a familiar global story. Yet it is one that should not negate the long history of Arab socialism, including many achievements that are all too easily forgotten, as well as failures that are commonly emphasized. As we have sought to show in this chapter, the Arab socialist tradition emerged out of conditions of colonialism and class struggle that were particular to the twentieth century. Yet, in our day and age, many of these conditions persist, assuming different names and garbs, but having the same oppressive effects. The stark structural realities of the present may well produce the conditions for socialist renewal in the future, but that is a story that is yet to unfold, let alone be told.

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